

# Pope Paul VI and Vietnam

Denis Kenny

It is generally recognized that Pope Paul VI has played a significant role in the development of initiatives for peace in Vietnam, and his efforts and attitudes have frequently been contrasted with those of the Catholic bishops of the United States. Since the publication of John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris* in 1963, and especially since Paul VI's visit to the United Nations in October, 1965, the papacy has attempted to create and fill a new role for itself as an agency of peace and reconciliation in the modern world. A close examination of the role of the Pope in initiatives for peace in Vietnam, however, reveals both the difficulties of the role and the extent to which the scarcely acknowledged political commitments of the Vatican profoundly affect the efficacy of these initiatives.

The Pope is in a unique position of moral influence. He would seem to be strategically placed to maintain a critical distance from nationalistic factors which obstruct the application of social moral principles and to exercise leverage upon Catholics within a nation to rise above those factors by making available to them informed assessments made by the Vatican and other parts of the Church, which stand apart from a conflict and can view it, therefore, with greater objectivity.

From the very early stages of the American phase of the war in Vietnam the Pope has expressed his deep concern, both in formal statements and in diplomatic initiatives, to bring about negotiations and truces. In February, 1964, Paul VI told the bishops of Vietnam that he had attempted to contact, directly or indirectly, and in a confidential manner, "officials representing various governments in order to ask them emphatically to contribute to an honorable and peaceful solution of different international difficulties which give us extreme anxiety." In Decem-

ber, 1965, he sent messages to Nikolai Podgorny, President of the Soviet Union, Mao Tse-tung, Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party, Ho Chi Minh, President of North Vietnam, and Nguyen Van Thieu, the Chief of State of South Vietnam, appealing to each to help bring about negotiations as a step toward ending the conflict. According to Monsignor Agostini Casaroli of the Papal Secretariat of State, the visit of President Johnson to the Pope in late 1967 stimulated a prolonged effort by the Pope to lay foundations for Vietnam peace negotiations. Papal diplomats were used to foster contacts among the various nations, and the Pope offered the service of the Holy See to foster the beginnings of a dialogue between the parties in the conflict or at least the sure communication of important information from one side to another. In the second half of 1966 Pope Paul, beginning with an address to the Collegé of Cardinals, mounted a diplomatic offensive to urge a seven-week Christmas truce in Vietnam in the hope that by a gradual extension of the truce it would be possible for negotiations and eventually peace to develop.

Two other actions during 1966 indicate the value of the role played by Pope Paul in exerting moral pressure for peace in Vietnam. The Vatican contributed \$150,000 to war victims in both North and South Vietnam and used its international charitable agencies for the impartial distribution of relief in both war zones. This gesture served the important function of preventing uncritical acceptance of the war by American Catholic public opinion and, more importantly, of preventing the war from being interpreted as a "holy war" conducted by the Christian West against the Communist East. In the second place, the Vatican sent Archbishop Sergio Pignedoli to preside as special papal representative at the annual meeting of the South Vietnamese bishops, reportedly "as part of an effort to persuade Vietnamese Catholics not to allow strong feelings against Hanoi

DENIS KENNY is a member of the Department of Religious Studies at New York's Fordham University.

to prevent their participation in a peace drive." Pignedoli himself claimed that his mission was one of a "strictly religious character." But he did state that his optimism about the possibility of peace was based upon improved relations between religious groups in Vietnam and the responsibility with which the Vietnamese bishops confronted for the first time "the integral religious problem" of Vietnam.

In spite of Pignedoli's disclaimer, the Vatican seems to have been using pressure to disengage the Catholic Church from any enthusiastic endorsement of the war from motives that might conjure up visions of a crusade. At the close of 1966, Francis Cardinal Spellman made a series of pronouncements about the war which were in stark contrast to Pope Paul's appeals for negotiations and peace, and which were an implicit repudiation of the moral logic of the just war theory. A number of Vatican officials responded very quickly both to dissociate the Vatican from Spellman's sentiments and also to point out that Spellman's remarks were understandable, since he was the military vicar of the U.S. armed forces. As *Commonweal* editorialized:

According to Vatican protocol, a Pope almost never issues a public criticism of a bishop. This is all the more true of a cardinal, an honored member of the papal family. Yet the profusion of "high Vatican sources" dissociating the Pope from Cardinal Spellman's Vietnam statements clearly add up to a rebuke—or as close to a public rebuke from the Pope as a cardinal is likely to receive [January 13, 1967].

Yet, at the same time, the Apostolic Delegate to the United States, Archbishop Vagnozzi, in a talk delivered in Kansas City, gave wholehearted endorsement to the American conduct of the war. He argued that "unless the Communists are stopped, it is a great danger that the aggression might be expanded to other countries." Indeed, the *Kansas City Times* in reporting the story began by saying: "The titular head of Roman Catholicism in this country, the apostolic delegate to the United States, gave unflinching support yesterday to America's policy in Southeast Asia."

Some of Vagnozzi's actions as Apostolic Delegate to the U.S. raised the question as to whether the Vatican had a double standard of values and two different policies to correspond with each of the values. Vagnozzi in the spring of 1967 rebuked the only Catholic bishop who had spoken out clearly against the American involvement in the war in Vietnam. He personally warned Bishop James Shannon that his statements criticizing the war in Vietnam were imprudent and that if he continued to speak out against the war he would jeopardize his chances of being promoted to higher office in the Church. Shannon replied that he thought that Vagnozzi, as the Pope's representative, should reflect the strong criticism of the war that Pope Paul VI

had voiced so often. However, Vagnozzi's only response was to reaffirm the warning that if Shannon continued to speak out he would injure his career in the Church. The suspicion raised by this episode was that the Vatican pursued one policy at the level of international diplomacy, where it maintained an image of impeccable neutrality, and another policy at the national level in a society with a large Catholic population, where it reinforced, or at least did not disrupt, the prevailing political moral orthodoxies and commitments. Vagnozzi's actions could only raise the question, because he might well have been acting on his own personal convictions and not on diplomatic instructions as the official representative of the Pope.

There is, however, a sense in which Shannon was mistaken, because he seemed to presume that the Pope had provided some support for an indictment of the American involvement in the war in Vietnam. It is not clear that this is the case. Paul VI consistently deplored the war and worked for a peaceful settlement. But he remained neutral and did not give any direct indication of where he thought the greater burden of culpability for the war lay. In nearly all of his statements he seems delicately to have balanced appeals to the other side. In May, 1967, Paul VI called on the U.S. to stop bombing North Vietnam and at the same time called on the North Vietnamese to halt the infiltration of arms and war materials into the South. He pointed out that he was not calling for peace at any price, but the cessation of all forms of violence, including terrorism, so that there could be "peace with justice, liberty and respect for the sacred values of the human person." In an address to the College of Cardinals at the close of 1967, Paul VI deplored the failure of his and other initiatives to bring about peace:

We are saddened and amazed to see how every disinterested offer of mediation is made in vain, and how every attempt at honest and peaceful negotiations is rejected, even though it still seems to us that an honorable solution to the sad and threatening dispute is possible. With no involvement in the interests of either side and with no other concern than the human values at stake, we have dared offer our unarmed collaboration.

This was to be the constant lament of the Pope concerning the war in Vietnam, that his ever best intention and effort had been to no avail. Nevertheless, on each occasion that he expressed his frustrations, he stated also his determination to continue to work for peace.

The North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front, however, may not have been as convinced as was the Pope himself of his role as a disinterested mediator. Paul's June, 1968, address to the College of Cardinals indicates that he might inadvertently have stepped into, or perhaps never really moved out of, the American geo-political frame of reference

and discourse. Since 1965 the Pope has operated, in his appeals and diplomatic initiatives, on the assumption of the validity of the principle of equivalence as a basis for negotiated settlement. Before the cessation of American bombing of North Vietnam, President Johnson and Secretary of State Rusk demanded a concession from the enemy that would match a halt to the U.S. bombing. When the bombing of the North did cease, the U.S. Administration acted as though it had one generous concession to its credit, with the implication that this could be withdrawn if the enemy proved too intransigent. It demanded of the enemy, with apparent reasonableness, that the North Vietnamese reciprocate with a withdrawal of its forces from South Vietnam and a suspension of supplies to the NLF. But this demand is reasonable only if one ignores the total historical context of the escalation of the conflict. If the U.S. were unilaterally to escalate a number of aggressive actions and then demand equivalent, mutual de-escalation as a condition for negotiations and peace, it would insure the defeat of the struggle for national liberation in Vietnam.

The gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops appears to give even further moral advantage to the U.S. and place the obligation on the North Vietnamese and the NLF to cease fighting even if one ignores the continuation of the high level of bombing, the changes in U.S. military strategy arising from the development of the electronic battlefield, and the program of Vietnamization. If the provisions of the 1954 Geneva accords represented a scenario for an equitable settlement, to want or to appear to want a set of conditions for negotiation which countenanced the original violation of those accords would seriously jeopardize the Pope's claim to neutrality in the eyes of the Vietnamese liberation movement.

This raises, however, the problem of the role of the Pope as mediator in conflicts of this kind. Pope Paul has clearly wanted to play a role as a mediator and conciliator in international conflicts. Should the Pope, therefore, use his moral authority in the interests of moral principle as a moral adjudicator so that he attempts to arrive at and state his conclusion about the relative liability and culpability of the parties involved? Or should he, on the other hand, use his moral authority in the role of a political mediator so that he eschews any hint of attribution of guilt but rather works patiently to salvage whatever can be saved from the conflict? Should the Pope be, in the role that he plays, a champion of moral ideals, or a political realist who has to make the best of a bad situation and sacrifice to some extent moral principle in the interests of pacifying the violent capacity exercised by powerful nations?

At the beginning of 1968 a group of 250 American Catholic priests asked Pope Paul to send a message

to the American people condemning the war in Vietnam. They acknowledged the complexity of the issues and the injustices perpetrated by both sides, but they claimed that "the overwhelming preponderance of injustice must be laid to the door of our own nation, for the tragic error which attended our first involvement, for the sheer volume of death being dealt each day. . . ." In the face of the escalation of American power they appealed to the Pope to condemn the U.S. involvement in "such words that no one of our leaders, no general, no senator, no bishop, no soldier, no citizen can fail to understand."

A similar appeal was made on behalf of the Young Catholic Workers involved in the Russell War Crimes Tribunal. In a letter to Pope Paul VI, Wedell Topp, writing on behalf of the YCW, regretted that the Pope's appeals and initiatives for peace in Vietnam had been unsuccessful. He then pointed out that the Vatican Council had absolutely condemned acts of war which indiscriminately destroyed cities and their inhabitants and claimed that it was clear that American warfare in Vietnam "is of such dimensions and of such a character that it comes under the conception of Total War." As such it should be absolutely condemned by the Church. Topp went on: "The official Church authorities cannot rightly expect the world to take their decisions seriously as long as they do not do so themselves, no matter what material loss this will cause the Church."

Pope Paul's role can best be analyzed in terms of a distinction made by U Thant when he first assumed the post of Secretary-General of the United Nations. On that occasion he promised that he would be impartial but not necessarily neutral, for he would judge each situation of conflict without bias, on its merits, but once having reached a solution as to the rights and wrongs, would speak out clearly. Impartially means without bias, while neutrality means a refusal to take sides in a war. Pope Paul seems to have taken the reverse position, namely, to be neutral but not impartial. His partiality or bias is not necessarily a matter of deliberate choice, but arises rather from preconscious institutional or ideological commitments.

To establish the origin and structure of these commitments would be a demanding and complicated task. The response of the Vatican to the Vietnam war does, however, make it possible to demonstrate and examine some of the evidence for these commitments. In the first place, to remain neutral when an injustice is being perpetrated can manifest one's lack of impartiality. It need not necessarily do this, for, as has been pointed out, the Pope may decide to use his neutrality and his moral authority to attempt to achieve a realistic and modest reduction of the level of destruction and human suffering in the context of a world in which power counts for much more than moral principle and justice. The problem with

this choice is that it erodes the credibility of the moral authority of the Pope in the eyes of those who suffer the injustice so that they then reject his offer of political mediation. The question also arises as to whether the Pope could not gain more by risking the reality of his authority over American Catholics by calling on them to refuse to support the war. In this case he would gain in terms of moral stature and influence on the world forum, but run the risk of losing out to the nationalistic commitments of the richest section of the Catholic Church.

Two issues are involved here: Does the Vatican use the posture of neutrality as a consistent policy, and secondly, is its policy of neutrality effective in the light of some clear evidence of a lack of impartiality? When Israeli guerrillas struck at the airport of Beirut in Lebanon in January, 1969, the Pope spoke out in explicit condemnation. He was explicit though indirect in his deploring of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia in August, 1968. In each of these cases the Vatican had little to lose in terms of institutional interests. Lebanon, with fifty per cent of its population Catholic, is the most Catholic of the Arab states, and non-neutrality in relation to Russia is a conditioned reflex of the Catholic Church. It is instructive, however, to contrast the responses of Pope Paul VI and U Thant to both the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia and the U.S. invasion of South Vietnam. Both the Pope and the Secretary-General opposed the Russian incursion. But only U Thant has condemned the U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Indeed, when taken to task by the U.S. representative to the U.N., George D. Ball, for not condemning Russia with the same vigor he brought to his condemnation of the U.S., U Thant replied: "If the Russians were bombing and napalming the villages of Czechoslovakia, you wait and see what I would have to say."

A number of factors could lead North Vietnam and the NLF to conclude that the moral authority of the Vatican was implausible because of its lack of impartiality, in spite of its attempt to remain neutral. There is, first of all, the bias inherent in the official teaching of the Catholic Church, which discriminates between war among nation states, which it permits under certain conditions, even in a nuclear age, and revolution, which it condemns except under the stringent terms expressed by Pope Paul in *Populorum Progressio*. This bias was made explicit in the encyclical *Mense Maio* of Paul VI, in which the Pope condemned "acts of guerrilla warfare and of terrorism, the practice of holding hostages and of taking reprisals against unarmed civilians." Inherent in an analysis of the meaning of this statement is the difficulty posed by Paul VI's tendency to link phenomena as if they were inextricably associated. Is he condemning guerrilla warfare as such, or because he thinks it is chronically associated with terrorism and reprisals against civilians, or only

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if it is so associated? For those who think that guerrilla warfare is not necessarily linked with atrocities, but who see it as the one last resort for survival against, and liberation from, an unjust and violent state, colonial or imperial oppressor, it would seem that the Church, which had refused to condemn the use of atomic weapons absolutely and which certainly conceded the right of states under certain circumstances to use the horrendous arsenal of modern conventional weapons available to them, was incurably and illogically biased against those masses of people who had neither the power nor the wealth to engage in conventional warfare.

The more subtle but nevertheless significant language of diplomatic relationships and visits would also seem to belie the studied neutrality of the Vatican. There has been, during the latter stages of the war, an intensification of the cordiality of the exchanges between the Vatican and Washington without any equivalent and public show of warmth between the Vatican and the leaders of the struggle for Vietnamese liberation. Beginning with the visit of President Johnson in 1967, through the visit of President Nixon in 1970, to the appointment of Henry Cabot Lodge as Nixon's personal envoy to the Vatican, U.S.-papal relationships entered a new phase at a time when it would seem that the Vatican should have maintained a greater critical distance to preserve its moral independence and at least the appearance of neutrality.

The acceptance of the appointment of Cabot Lodge was especially infelicitous. Lodge, as was well known at the time, had been, as U.S. Ambassador to Saigon in 1963, an accessory before and during the fact of the coup against President Ngo Dinh Diem. The basis of the legality of the claim of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam was that it had been invited by Diem. To have him overthrown and replaced was an exercise in cynical *realpolitik*. For the Vatican, which claims a role of moral leadership in the world, to accept Lodge as a special representative of Nixon could only compromise that claim. But the acceptance of Lodge also contrasted with the refusal of the Vatican to give a papal audience to Madame Binh, the head of the Provisional Revolutionary Gov-

ernment delegation to the Paris peace talks, in the first half of 1971. The Vatican would no doubt argue that its diplomatic organization demands that it deal with heads of state and not appear to give recognition to representatives of insurgency movements. Yet this is the heart of the problem. The Vatican becomes part of a web of relationships, or a reference system of international power configurations, which seriously compromises not only its impartiality, but also any attempt at a neutrality that can convince those struggling against political domination and oppression by a foreign power.

The depth of the bias of Pope Paul VI was manifested in an address he gave at the Vatican reception of five U.S. governors in November, 1969. The Pope used the occasion to stress the obligations of affluent countries to the poor nations and deplored the tendency of the former to supply armaments rather than food and medicine. But then he went on to express his personal satisfaction with the "well thought out" plan of President Nixon to end the war in Vietnam. Both at that time and since, many serious commentators wondered whether Mr. Nixon had devised a plan to end the war or was simply executing a strategy to carry it on and win it in a different way, namely, by a combination of Vietnamizing the ground forces and intensifying the use of American air power. The Pope, however, could not be blamed for attributing sincere intentions to the President. The difficulty arose with the set of assumptions which he manifestly shared with the President. It is these assumptions which reveal the lack of impartiality of the Pope and undermine his neutrality. After expressing satisfaction with the renewed resolve of the President to end the war, the Pope continued:

Nevertheless, we also understand that the right way of ending the conflict demands, in present circumstances, a well thought out and responsible procedure; not only to avoid neglecting international obligations which honor the confidence of one's allies and which is not to be betrayed and which also must be fulfilled, but also in order that the cause and the ideal proposed to your fellow citizens, for which so many have made the sacrifice of their very lives; that is, of helping people who are weak and deserving of assistance to defend their right to self-determination and to the free promotion of their peaceful development--this cause and this ideal should not be denied.

The Pope was obviously speaking on the assumption that the U.S. was subject to no suspicion of imperialistic propensities or ambitions, and this was underlined by the Vatican weekly *L'Osservatore Della Domenica*, which claimed explicitly that the U.S. has no imperialistic ends in mind in Vietnam. But

the Pope went further than this charitable assumption to accept the fundamental American justification for being in Vietnam, and to seem to acknowledge that, because of the cause espoused, the system of alliances that the U.S. had built, and the lives already sacrificed in Vietnam, American defeat was unacceptable. As the *National Catholic Reporter* editorialized, commenting on this statement of Paul's:

The Pope takes as granted the pivotal issue for judging the American Vietnam involvement on its political—much less moral—merits. That question is whether the United States has intruded upon a nationalist struggle and in the process broken the Geneva accords to prop up a puppet government unrepresentative of the people of South Vietnam. This point has been debated in every American forum, including the U.S. Senate. From Averill Harriman to Senator Fulbright to David Dellinger, there is a spectrum of dissent from Nixon's policy on precisely this ground. The Pope flatly accepts the rationale [November 26, 1969].

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, on the other hand, had rejected each of the foundations on which this rationale was based.

The discipline of social ethics requires the elaboration of a methodology for establishing a critical distance from the ideology induced by class interests and nationalistic allegiances, to function as a therapeutic for the perceptual distortions caused by such an ideology both in the enunciation and application of social ethical principles. The world needs, moreover, an institution which can function as the organizational counterpart of such a methodology, which could offer to the citizens of each country data, alternative perspectives, and concrete judgments that would be resources according to which men and women could critically evaluate the policies of their own nation. The Second Vatican Council thus described the service that it desired to offer the world:

This Sacred Synod . . . offers to mankind the honest assistance of the Church in fostering that brotherhood of all men which corresponds to this destiny of theirs. Inspired by no earthly ambition, the Church seeks but a solitary goal: to carry forward the work of Christ Himself under the lead of the befriending Spirit.

The performance of the Vatican in relation to the Vietnam war, however, indicates that it is not sufficiently detached from its long cultural conditioning and its traditional political commitments to fulfill this function adequately or credibly. In spite of the willingness of the papacy to appear on the world stage in the role of an agent of peace and the reconciler of nations, it is manifestly not yet equipped with the ethical resources or the moral perceptiveness to do justice to the role.